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World Cinema between the rock of the unknowable and the hard place of the as yet unknown

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ABSTRACT

Hypotheses that instigated the possibility of destabilising and de-westernising film theory have inspired a critical framework for analysing World Cinema that demands new and evolving understandings of its construction and fluidity, particularly in relation to its lost pasts and possible futures. Referencing several key works in this field and responding to David Martin-Jones's *Cinema Against Doublethink: Ethical Encounters with the Lost Pasts of World History* (2019) in particular, this article questions what is unknowable and as yet unknown about World Cinema. Following Derrida, it argues that the answers lie in how World Cinema gains meaning(s) through the process of *différance* (difference and deferral of meaning), particularly through genre. Deploying and dismantling genre theory in case studies of *Wind River* (Sheridan 2017), *Chung Hing sam la/Chungking Express* (Wong 1994), *Faa yeung nin wa/In The Mood for Love* (Wong 2000), *Moonlight* (Jenkins 2016) and *Widows* (McQueen 2018), the article targets the logjam of ethical hesitancy in approaching World Cinema and, holding that impurities in western cinema constitute trace evidence of new paradigms happening elsewhere in World Cinema, posits empathy and its deferral as essential to an understanding of the dynamics of the cinemas of the world.

KEYWORDS

World Cinema; genre;
Derrida; empathy;
de-westernisation; theory

Three women, one Black, one Hispanic and one White, enter a sauna. Antagonistic strangers at first, they leave united in common cause of revenge. The scene occurs in *Widows* (McQueen 2018), wherein ideas of something unknowable or as yet unknown play out in a dialectical performance of exposure, which makes differences explicit, and erasure, which makes them irrelevant. Naked under towels and glistening in a way that emphasises both their ethnic distinctions and their common gender, these women resolve their differences through empathy. Meanwhile the framing makes the unity of their organic forms stand out against the rigid geometry of their surroundings (see Figure 1). Extrapolated for a symbolic reading, these women are cinemas of the world, ostensibly held here in relation to genre filmmaking and Hollywood, but actually bound up in a complex matrix of postcolonial, neoliberal, gendered and globalising concerns

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Figure 1. Exposure makes differences explicit and erasure makes them irrelevant in *Widows* (McQueen 2018).

that extend the debate over erasure and appropriation established in *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media*, wherein Shohat and Stam argued that ‘the residual traces of centuries of axiomatic European domination inform the general culture, the everyday language, and the media, engendering a fictitious sense of the innate superiority of European-derived cultures and peoples’ (1994, 1). Aiming to demote Hollywood to one of many cinemas of the world, their use of the concept of ‘trace’ echoed Derrida and was key to their argument, which diagnosed a cultural hierarchy in which European culture, including ‘the neo-Europeans’ of North America and Australia, ‘bifurcates the world into the “West and the Rest”’ (Shohat and Stam 1994, 1). This hierarchy is articulated around a strategy that ‘organizes everyday language into binaristic hierarchies implicitly flattering to Europe: *our* “nations”, *their* “tribes”; *our* “religions”, *their* “superstitions”; *our* “culture”, *their* “folklore”; *our* “art”, *their* “artefacts”; *our* “demonstrations”, *their* “riots”; *our* “defense”, *their* “terrorism”’ (Shohat and Stam 1994, 2). So what is ‘ours’ and what is ‘theirs’ in this image from *Widows*?

The argument for equivalency between Hollywood as a *nom de guerre* of mainstream, commercial western cinema and other cinemas of the world is not qualitative nor quantitative. Instead of comparing like for like in the matter of Hollywood and Bollywood melodramas, or Nollywood and Hollywood gangster films, for example, Shohat and Stam destabilise hierarchies in order to set in motion a way of thinking that is fuelled by ‘relational and radical *polycentric multiculturalism*’ (1994, 48). Their emphasis is ‘less on intentions than on institutional discourses, less on “goodness” and “badness” than on historically configured relations of power’ (Shohat and Stam 1994, 3). Nevertheless, they do conflate wide-ranging arguments by claiming that ‘one name for Eurocentrism is Hollywoodcentrism,’ which locates the start of film history at the post-World War II industrial exploitation of film and its consequent ‘soft power’ erasure of other cultures (Shohat and Stam 1994, 29). But whereas the de-westernising of film theory and criticism – and indeed, film history – has struggled to escape the simplistic

binary equation that ‘centralizes Hollywood as a kind of *language* in relation to which all other forms are but dialectical variants’ (Shohat and Stam 1994, 30), so too has it tended to demonise Hollywood in ways that reinforce its centrality. Entrapment in this binary equation is clearly inseparable from the limits of our knowledge. Hence, a tautology: we do not know what we do not know. So how then might we recognise what Jameson posits as new ‘paradigms of interpretation’ (see Hardt and Weeks 2000, 31–114) in a foreign (relative) or other (comparative) cinema if our pathways to knowledge are blocked by our not knowing what we do not know? This Socratic conundrum is ancient but pertinent to the study of films from ‘other’ cinemas of the world, wherein ethical address wavers between the pessimism and resignation of perceiving and holding that such things are unknowable, and the optimism and enthusiasm of contending they are only as yet unknown. Should Anglophone studies wait for other cinemas to be made knowable by other critics, scholars and filmmakers, or are ethical manoeuvres by Anglophone critics, scholars and filmmakers, such as language acquisition and prolonged immersion, viable attempts at making other cinemas known, albeit at the risk of a limited western perspective on their meaning?

In *Remapping World Cinema: Identity, Culture and Politics in Film*, Dennison and Lim argued that categorisation is a futile way to go about answering ‘what is world cinema?’ (2006, 1). Instead, their anthology offered case studies of ‘hybridity, transculturation, border crossing, transnationalism and translation’ that accumulatively suggested World Cinema might be ‘a discipline, a methodology and a perspective’ (Dennison and Lim 2006, 6–7). This cautious exploration of World Cinema was continued by Iordanova, Martin-Jones and Vidal in *Cinema at the Periphery*, which noted that ‘*accented, interstitial, intercultural, underground, or minor cinemas* are just some of the terms used by various authors to advocate the mounting urge to conceptualize cultural production that takes into consideration the global interchange of players, be they big or small, prevailing or frail’ (2010, 3). Destabilisation was a vital stage in understanding the dynamics of World Cinema that demanded dismissal of distinctions between ‘the West and the Rest’ as well as any imbalance between peripheral and central perspectives in order to reveal ‘a scholarly space where the multiple peripheral strands may *speak* for themselves without having to face the onerous burden of constantly explaining themselves in the context of a Eurocentric construct’ (Iordanova, Martin-Jones, and Vidal 2010, 4). This idea that peripheral strands should speak for themselves rather invalidated analyses of World Cinema from the Anglophone ‘centre’, however, and left hanging the question of whether films from the variable periphery were now unknowable or as yet unknown.

Breaking the ethical logjam were two proto-manifestos in 2012. *Theorizing World Cinema* offered consensus that ‘once notions of a single centre, primacies and diachronities are discarded, everything can be put on the world cinema map on an equal footing, even Hollywood, which instead of a threat becomes a cinema among others’ (Nagib, Perriam, and Dudrah 2012, xxii), while *De-Westernizing Film Studies* sought ‘polycentric, multi-directional, non-essentialized alternatives to Eurocentric theoretical and historical perspectives found in film as both an artistic medium and an academic field of study’ (Bâ and Higbee 2012, 1). Both asserted that de-westernising does not entail an enclosed and readily defined critical term but rather an ongoing process entrenched in a constant debate between scholars, filmmakers and audiences in a global context. Thus, the concepts of World Cinema that were erected on the ‘scholarly space’ incorporated flux

so that ideas ‘from sources outside of the traditional Western spheres of influence’ were equal to those attempts at ‘understanding how case studies drawn from a range of global film cultures can inform contemporary debates in film theory’ (Bà and Higbee 2012, 12). Subsequent surveys of World Cinema erased hierarchies in their structure. In *Queer Cinema in the World*, Schoonover and Galt argue that studies of cinema histories have been undertaken from an ‘overly hetero’ perspective and counter this with an understanding that ‘queer cinema enables different ways of being in the world and, more than this, that it creates different worlds [by] a process that is active, incomplete, and contestatory and that does not presuppose a settled cartography’ (Schoonover and Galt 2016, 5–6). The Derridean notion of trace appears here too, as a means of identifying queerness as ‘a spectral disturbance in the textual field’ (Schoonover and Galt 2016, 162). In a similar vein, *The Routledge Companion to World Cinema* devised a critical framework based on interaction between longitude (‘geographical areas, ways of mapping or remapping the landscape and extent of World Cinema’) and latitude (‘new theoretical strategies pertaining to thematic and practical ways of understanding and negotiating World Cinema’) that was aimed at ‘revealing, exploring, explaining and considering commonalities and differences between the scale, engagement, strategies and anomalies of areas of filmmaking activity worldwide’ (Stone et al. 2018, 2–4). Both volumes posit the act of questioning as an ethical, critical stance that must be adopted for the study of World Cinema. What was still missing nonetheless, was not the Socratic knowledge that we did not know things (that was a given), but the answer to whether what we did not know was unknowable or as yet unknown.

This question concerns Martin-Jones in *Cinema Against Doublethink: Ethical Encounters with the Lost Pasts of World History*, which investigates ‘cinematic depictions of the past – specifically lost pasts (disappeared, censored, forgotten, eradicated) [that] are aesthetically structured like ethical encounters with others’ (2019, 2). Martin-Jones posits that a world of cinemas offers spectators encounters with lost pasts that can make them ‘hesitate, and potentially [...] recognise *the relative centrality of their own place in world history*’ (2019, 2). He regards these cinematic encounters, which ‘indicate the unknowability of lost pasts’ (2019, 50), as opportunities for doubt and reflective misgivings about the West’s assumption of heading a hierarchy in the matter of World Cinema. His critical framework, which blends the Deleuzian time-image with the ethics of liberation devised by Argentinian philosopher Enrique Dussel within world-systems theory, de-centres the Eurocentrism of the time-image and re-purposes its ideological potential as a means of ‘reconnection with the world [...] *because of its re-activation of world memory*’ (Martin-Jones 2019, 74). The time-image is thus a vehicle-forum for hesitance about one’s own place in the world when confronted by films that ‘deny the denial of coevalness to which regions under colonialism have been subjected’ as they offer ‘leftover glimpses of a totality we will likely never recover: the virtual past, world memory’ (Martin-Jones 2019, 99, 10–1). Yet, by conflating the lost pasts of colonial abuses with histories of colonial power and taking up other perspectives on the present, films can point to as yet unwritten futures. And so it is here, from Martin-Jones’ assertion of unknowability that we respectfully depart towards the deferral of knowledge that is only as yet unknown. The wider context of lost pasts includes questions of memory, politicised rewritings of history, heritage and much else, but our concern is with film form and genre as another ‘scholarly space’ for considering how we move away from a lost past towards a

possible new future. Martin-Jones locates this ‘future yet to come’ (2019, 176) in territory similar to Deleuze’s modern political (minor) cinema that contributes to ‘the invention of a people’, where the past is preserved and the present passes, thereby creating their future (Deleuze 1989, 40). However, we are concerned with the potential for a multiplicity of possible futures to overcome a lost past or ‘official’ history, and therefore positioned closer to Holtmeier’s contention that each of these futures has the potential to not only be realised but politicised through subjectivity (see Holtmeier 2019). This is because, where Holtmeier claims that ‘cinema approaches an existential register in depicting the lived experiences of individuals caught in the midst of these civilizational clashes’ (Holtmeier 2016, 305), we see potential for empathy.

For example, the authentic encounter with the lost past of Native American culture in *Wind River* (Sheridan 2017) erases any future ‘official’ history of blaming tribal cultures in the matter of child abuse within the remnants of those cultures. It does this by deploying a procedural detective thriller to re-direct blame for a killing towards the original genocide inflicted upon Native Americans and the abrogation of responsibility for this and its survivors ever since. American history stalls in *Wind River* when confronted with the baseline of at least three lost pasts. Firstly, the lost past of the genocide itself, which has a minor and muted place in American cinema. Secondly, the lost past of what those Native American tribes might have achieved and become if they had not been wiped out and their potential erased. And thirdly, the passing-present of the ongoing erasure of Native American tribes that have never been federally recognised. These three lost pasts in *Wind River* also indicate the Derridean notion of the specter in relation to hauntology, wherein it is a trace that results from the injunction between a present-past that never meets and a present-future that never comes (Derrida 2011, 45–7). This specter exerts its haunting from the lost pasts acknowledged by Martin-Jones, but also from the lost futures that may never happen because, as Derrida explains, ‘at the bottom, the specter is always the future, it is always to come, it presents itself as that which could come or come back’ (2011, 48). This ‘haunting belongs to the structure of every hegemony’ (Derrida 2011, 46) and its presence is felt in the snowblind *Wind River*, which is haunted by the lost past of the Native American genocide, the lost futures of the murdered characters in the film, the lost presents of those characters whose lives are destroyed by the socioeconomic isolation of their reservation, and the erasure of the Native American people and culture as a whole.

The facts of this lost past are that while 573 Native American tribes were federally recognised following the 1934 Indian Reorganization Act (231 of which were located in Alaska), the award of tribal status was only reached via a process that a 2009 Senate Committee on Indian Affairs reported was ‘broken’, ‘long’, ‘expensive’, ‘burdensome’, ‘intrusive’, ‘interminable’, ‘unfair’ and ‘subject to bureaucratic interpretation’, thereby demonstrating that erasure of lost pasts through bureaucracy can both equal and cover up military intervention (Committee on Indian Affairs 2009). Martin-Jones provides a framework for understanding such erasure through his notion of colonial history as an operation of Orwellian doublethink, whereby ‘although the evidence is clear before the settler colonist’s eyes that there is another history enmeshed in the land, they are able to simply pretend it does not exist, state the validity of their own claim on this otherwise history-less territory, and make it theirs’ (2019, 83). In the case of the Native American genocide that haunts *Wind River*, this doublethink is enacted via the bureaucratic process

of selecting and validating the Native American identities of tribes that existed prior to the arrival of European settlers and the cultural erasure in Hollywood westerns where Native Americans were mostly savages, obstacles to civilisation, and guilty, therefore, of provoking their own extermination. Yet *Wind River* provincialises the American-European audience's notion of its centrality in the world, relegates *its* history, and punctures the hubris that comes with its assumption. There is a reckoning here as in Martin-Jones' case studies [*Loong Boonmee raleuk chat/Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives* (Weerasethakul 2010), *También la lluvia/Even The Rain* (Bollaín 2010) and *El abrazo de la serpiente/Embrace of The Serpent* (Guerra 2015)], with each of these films leaving audiences with the thought that their/our lost pasts cannot be retrieved, that the only thing that can be ethically achieved by such films is the realisation that other existences and histories once occurred but are now unknowable. But the question remains of how this logjam of ethical encounters by filmmakers and audiences with the lost pasts of 'their' cinemas and the lost histories of 'our' world might be resolved or negotiated. Indigenous filmmaking, such as the recent surge in films with a Native Canadian provenance that includes *Blood Quantum* (Barnaby 2019), *The Incredible 25th Year of Mitzi Bearclaw* (Niro 2019) and *The Body Remembers When the World Broke Open* (Hepburn and Tailfeathers 2019), has been heralded by the Indigenous Film Conference as a way to 'reclaim our silence and invisible stories' (Mitchell 2018). Nevertheless, the rights to representation are often tied up in wider questions of authenticity and legitimacy, as demonstrated by academic studies of indigenous films [see, for example, de Valck (2018, 393–403) on *Tanna* (Butler and Dean 2015)] and the aforementioned Senate Committee on Indian Affairs, which criticised the validation of some tribes and the rejection of others not only by the US Federal government but by other tribes too.

Those 573 tribes currently recognised by the US Federal government all fulfilled the seven criteria for recognition established by the 1978 Indian Claims Commission, which included demands for evidence of long-standing historical community, outside identification as Indians, political authority, and descent from a historical tribe, but it took the Shinnecock Indian Nation thirty-two years from its application in 1978 to official recognition in 2010. And what of all those who did not meet the criteria, such as the Pascua Yaquis, the Death Valley Timbisha Shoshones, the Houma, and the Tiguas of El Paso (Miller 2006)? In *Wind River*, a veteran White hunter called Corey (Jeremy Renner) helps a White FBI agent (Elisabeth Olsen) to investigate the murder of a young Native American woman in Wyoming, but what distinguishes this procedural crime drama is its complication by the un-remembering of tribal customs by the Eastern Shoshone Native American characters that they interrogate such as Martin (Gil Birmingham). The lost past of the Eastern Shoshone is not only *in* the past but *in* the present too, for it holds the missing key as to why the girl was murdered, meaning the absence of any narrative resolution is therefore also and always *in* their (and our) future too. In the film's final scene, Corey finds Martin sitting in the snow outside his house with a painted face. Martin admits that his efforts at performing grief are ignorant and redundant, however, for the blue and white marks he fashioned as his 'death face' are meaningless: 'I just made it up. There's nobody left to teach me.' Instead of tribal identity, the made-up death face exhibits its erasure (see Figure 2). The subsequent fade to black is followed by a title card explaining how statistics are kept for every group of missing people in the US except



Figure 2. Instead of tribal identity, a made-up death face exhibits its erasure in *Wind River* (Sheridan 2017).

Native American women, that nobody knows how many are missing. The lost past of the Eastern Shoshone is erased and so unknowable; but how might audiences, filmmakers and scholars of World Cinema proceed past this ethical encounter with the lost past of this Native American tribe that is also our/their own?

As for the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs, determining the authenticity of Native American representation in *Wind River* is an irresolute matter. Is the film itself devalued and de-authenticated by employing Gil Birmingham, an actor of Comanche ancestry, to play an Eastern Shoshone? If there are no Shoshone actors available, can even this attempt at telling what is left of their history by a non-indigenous White Texan writer-director attempting to broker representation and appropriation be discounted? The 'historically configured relations of power' that were key to Shohat and Stam's argument lie at the core of the ethical questions thrown up by even this well-intentioned encounter with a lost past, which appear insurmountable and therefore contribute to the logjam. Well intentioned because writer-director Taylor Sheridan spent several periods in the Pine Ridge reservation of the Arapahoe and Shoshone and claims first-hand experience of the racism they encountered ('I was being judged not by my race, but by theirs') as well as tribal elders advising him to make a film that would 'tell the worst of what is here because the worst of our history is not our fault' (Ayuso 2018). Subsequently, Sheridan submitted the screenplay of *Wind River* to these Shoshone and Arapahoe elders – 'I wanted them to read it and I wanted their blessing. They were very happy that someone was telling their story' – cast numerous Native American actors, and told Olsen that her character was 'a stand-in for America's collective consciousness' (Darling 2017). This, after his initial plan of having Native American characters as protagonists was compromised by casting Renner and Olsen, two of Marvel's Avengers, in order to obtain funding (Ayuso 2018). Nevertheless, at the 2017 Cannes Film Festival, Sheridan was confronted with ethical questions about his telling a story of a lost past that was arguably not his to tell. His response to the *Un Certain Regard* award for *Wind River* acknowledged the logjam and called for a breakthrough by means of impassioned representation:

It is a great shame of my nation the manner it has treated the original inhabitants of North America. Sadly, my government continues that shame through an insidious mixture of apathy and exploitation. There is nothing I can do to change the issues afflicting Indian Country, but what we can all do as artists—and must do—is scream about them with fists clenched. What we CAN do—is make sure these issues aren’t ignored. (Thompson 2017)

In other words, what Sheridan advocated was representation of the lost past of the Native Americans by any means necessary and by anyone able as a strategy of deferral that was justified by the changes this might provoke in the cause of its endgame, that of enabling representation of the lost pasts of Native Americans by Native American filmmakers.

The ethical credentials of *Wind River* are increasingly challenged and demanded of western representations of otherness in World Cinema, thereby dismantling hierarchy. The debate over who has the responsibility and legitimacy to tell a story that represents a history of any kind, whether directly in the film itself or indirectly in the analysis of that film, is central to Martin-Jones’ concerns about World Cinema, where unknowability stands in lieu of lost histories that can be verified, which cannot be verified because they are lost. However, if we read unknowability in structuralist terms, we may posit that the other’s past (and so our own) is the signified, which is not unknowable but as yet unknown because knowledge of it (and so why it matters) is deferred in a Derridean sense and strategy, which may break the logjam produced by the assumption of unknowability in relation to World Cinema. This deferral of an as yet unknown meaning relates directly to Derrida’s concept of *différance*, which combines the meanings of ‘defer’ and ‘differ’. Derrida destabilises the structural pattern of sign-signifier-signified in which meaning is achieved when the three concepts successfully interconnect by positing that this operation can never be successful in the first place, since sign, signifier and signified exist in different times and therefore cannot be reconciled (1976, 64). The resulting vacuum within the structuralist equation is what Derrida denominates the ‘trace’ (1976, 64). This is a concept that already permeates our argument because it features in Shohat and Stam’s understanding of Eurocentrism as ‘residual traces’ (1994, 1) of colonial domination, in Schoonover and Galt’s concept of the queer as a ‘spectral disturbance in the textual field’ (2016, 162) and in Derrida’s own specters in relation to Martin-Jones’ lost pasts. Therefore, positing Derrida’s trace as the key to unlocking the unknowability of World Cinema brings to the boil an argument that has simmered for decades. Because Derrida holds that the existence of the trace causes meaning to be deferred, as per his definition of *différance*, so the success or meaning of the combination sign-signifier-signified (the reason why it matters) is postponed, pending the conditions for a connection between the three elements, which means the reason why it matters is not unknowable but only as yet unknown.

At the same time, *why it matters* may differ from any original meaning as a result of adding undetermined extra time to the resolution. Depending on our spatial and temporal position in the world, any given film made by ‘others’ may not appear readily discernible at first instance because we lack enough knowledge to connect sign-signifier-signified. The answer to why a film matters is postponed, but the search for the knowledge that ‘unlocks’ a film to which we are ‘the other’ has at least begun. Potential is thus restored to studies of World Cinema, even though the signified of films is deferred, which does not matter if one’s own lack of knowledge is accepted as the basis for the act of questioning because this restores the ethical element to the structuralist equation and

breaks the logjam of scholarship on World Cinema. ‘Our’ answers are not and cannot be the sign of knowledge because of the apparent unknowability of subjects, such as what is to be an Eastern Shoshone (unless we are an Eastern Shoshone with an exclusive lock on representation that transcends individualism, which returns us to the hubris that underpins the logjam). The sign of knowledge must therefore be the question: that is, knowing what we do not know in order to know what question to ask. And if we ask enough of the right questions in an ethical manner, then the signified might be understood as *that which matters* at any given time and place. To those being represented and doing the representing, that which matters might be their lost past, remembered for us and them. Thus, it no longer matters that Martin in *Wind River* made up his death mask. What matters (what is signified) by our questioning of Martin – ‘What’s with the paint?’ ‘It’s my death face.’ ‘And how do you know what that is?’ – is that his (and our) lost past is being represented. Moreover, it is in this present moment that a future is suggested in which Martin’s made-up death mask initiates a *new* history by re-attaching itself to an old one. And so the impasse is breached by questions (signs of knowledge) becoming signifiers (the ethical questioning of that which is apparently unknowable) in order to get at what is signified (that which matters), albeit deferred (as yet unknown).

Empathy becomes a fundamental tool in this process, as is reflected in the ending of *Wind River*, where Martin and Corey represent this as a sharing of someone else’s ‘congruent feelings’ (Plantinga 2009, 10). Having lost a daughter to rape and murder himself, Corey empathises with Martin’s pain by means of positing questions that carry both personal and social, and ultimately political, resonance. Personal, because he knows how it feels to lose a child. Social, because he has lived on the reservation, married a Native American woman and knows, if only partially, the congruent feelings of loss of the Eastern Shoshone tribe as a whole. And political, because Corey and Martin sense that each young woman who is murdered and unaccounted for sustains the ongoing genocide. Empathy is what enables Corey to accept the Socratic principle of acknowledging his lack of knowledge as a prior condition for the acquisition of knowledge and thus ask Martin the right questions. The challenge to World Cinema scholars is similar, but rather than allow this notion to float away into etiological discourse, we shall attempt to ground it in a structural one. Specifically, we shall attach the Derridean concept of *the deferral of the meaning of the difference* to the signified (that which matters) in the structuralist equation sign-signifier-signified and apply this to the study of genre in World Cinema.

This shift toward genre theory serves two objectives in the study of World Cinema. Firstly, it clarifies the nuances within the structuralist equation of sign-signifier-signified as the basis of an open question rather than a closed statement because genre filmmaking offers readily defined structures within film theory in terms of form, meaning and industrial practice. Secondly, it explores genre as an aspect of World Cinema theory that has remained largely ignored in key texts on World Cinema. In *Film/Genre* Altman conceives of genre as grounded in historicity rather than abstract theory and criticises genre analysis that has the objective of creating pure categories and clear boundaries (2012, 216–26). Instead, he focuses on generic cycles within Hollywood’s industry and proposes that genre is ‘not the permanent *product* of a singular origin, but the temporary *by-product* of an ongoing *process*’ that is governed by industrial dynamics aimed at creating brief cycles of films that, if successful, are replicated by other studios, thus turning into a genre, which is understood as such by the industry, filmmakers and

audience (2012, 54, 61). Altman concludes that ‘genres are not only formal arrangements of textual characteristics; they are also social devices that use semantics and syntax to assure simultaneous satisfaction on the part of multiple users with apparently contradictory purposes. That is, genres are regulatory schemes facilitating the integration of diverse factions into a single unified social fabric’ (2012, 195). He therefore refers any new example of a genre back to the Hollywoodcentric ‘blueprint, structure, label and contract’ as if he were a patent lawyer (Altman 2012, 14). Following Altman, this fixed-point perspective in Anglo-American scholarship and criticism has tended to prevail in World Cinema studies, where any film with genre tropes from anywhere in the world, such as a Romanian western or a Japanese science-fiction film, is to be disentangled from the Hollywood formula and system to which it supposedly remains subject. In other words, the signified is mainly explained or ‘made sense of’ by reference to Hollywood, regardless of all that is unknowable or as yet unknown about a film. Some critics and scholars, foreign or otherwise, albeit perhaps pending translation (or their acquisition of language or cultural knowledge or that of other scholars and critics), may claim and share understanding of further meanings, but most genre films remain subject to this fixed-perspective analysis. In *Genre and Hollywood*, however, Neale extends the notion of genre outside the realm of Hollywood into non-western cinemas and among the elements that he identifies within this more worldly and historical discussion of genre are ‘expectations [,] texts [,] categories, corpuses, the norms they encompass, the traditions they embody and the formulae that mark them [...] as ubiquitous, multifaceted phenomena rather than as one-dimensional entities to be found only within the realms of Hollywood cinema or of commercial popular culture’ (2000, 25–8). Neale’s praxis for the study of genre includes industrial rationale, economic optimisation and the aesthetic aspects of genre films ‘as myths with a cultural and social function’ (2000, 254–5). He also limits his argument, however, by invariably identifying non-Hollywood examples of genre films within the restrictive confines of national cinemas such as ‘the Indian mythological, the Japanese samurai film, or the Hong Kong *wu xia pan* or swordplay film’ (2000, 9). This means that his argument does not conclude with fluidity but *another* fixity. Nevertheless, Neale’s praxis does suggest how a film may speak for itself through its own structural equation. Just as Barthes builds upon Saussure by recognising that signs are the genome of myths and, therefore, that myth in its most basic form is a type of speech, so Neale builds on film as myth, as form, as speech: that is, not just a collection of elements making up a narrative (or history) but a *way* of saying something that is structured in this certain way (see Barthes 2013, 215–274). Moreover, leaning forward into postmodernism reveals a corollary with the structural equation of sign-signifier-signified that is discernible in Jameson’s ideas about parody, pastiche and paradigm, albeit problematised by retrograde notions of their hierarchy that are entangled in postcolonialism too.

In *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Jameson reads genre as a cultural phenomenon inscribed in modernist and postmodernist dynamics and conceives of parody and pastiche as ‘new types of syntax or syntagmatic relationships in the more temporal arts’ (1992, 6). For Jameson, parody, pastiche and new paradigms can reveal the evolution of postcolonialism. Parody exposes colonial tropes by exaggerating them to the point of ridicule, which suggests they are obsolete. Pastiche, meanwhile, entails a melange of the colonial and the post-colonial, wherein there can be tensions but also reconciliations, even affection. Parody and pastiche are seen explicitly in the two half-stories of



Figure 3. The dead language of genre in *Chung Hing sam la/Chungking Express* (Wong 1994).

heartbroken Hong Kong cops in *Chung Hing sam la/Chungking Express* (Wong 1994). The first half-story is a parody of western tropes with its desperately romantic Cop 223 (Takeshi Kaneshiro) embroiled in a neon-lit film noir with a femme fatale in a blonde wig (Brigitte Lin). However, the generic visual trappings are only the backdrop to Cop 223 struggling to find cans of pineapple with expiry dates that suggest existence beyond the pending handover of Hong Kong to China after 100 years of British administration on 1 July 1997. Unable to postpone this deadline and thereby retain meaning, these nihilist characters succumb to parody and spend a drunken, sexless, bored night together that reveals the redundancy of the western iconography (the dead language of the gangster genre) that defines them (see Figure 3). This, as Jameson explains, is ‘the imitation of a peculiar or unique, idiosyncratic style, the wearing of a linguistic mask, speech in a dead language’ (Jameson 1992, 17).

After the handover, however, the film’s second half-story sees Cop 663 (Tony Leung) hanging out and falling for a pixie-girl waitress called Faye (Faye Wong), and the melange of ‘western’ and ‘eastern’ influences in multicultural Hong Kong is rendered as pastiche. There is tension here but affection too, as well as efforts at reconciliation, such as in Wong’s performance (on the soundtrack and in character) of ‘Dreams’ by The Cranberries in Cantonese. Cop 663 leaves the Royal Hong Kong Police Force, which was established by the British Hong Kong government in 1844 and dropped its ‘Royal’ prefix in 1997, and buys the café while Faye takes flight as an air hostess, only to return several months later to find a new future for them both in Hong Kong. Thus, while the first ‘colonial’ half-story of *Chung Hing sam lam* effects a parody of western influences on Hong Kong, the second ‘post-colonial’ half-story accepts the pastiche that endures. Indeed, *Chung Hing sam lam* revels in this pastiche, roistering with aural and visual motifs such as ‘California Dreaming’ by The Mamas and The Papas playing repeatedly

while the twisting hand-held camerawork enhances the haptic, sensorial, near-fetishization of the musical montages. Consequently, the resultant aesthetic experience communicates a freshness, a potential, and a frisson that responds to all the possibilities available to these characters, and thereby embodies Theodor Lipps' modern concept of empathy as *Einfühlung* or 'feeling into' something (see Lipps 1907), such as the unknown of post-handover Hong Kong.

Shohat and Stam's historically configured relations of power presage the different fates of the two sets of couples in *Chung Hing sam la*, but what remains to be determined is whether a new paradigm might emanate from post-colonial Hong Kong and how this might be recognised if it does. One way of overcoming any unknowability of Hong Kong cinema might be to study it intensely, which requires immersion, language acquisition and research into any number of themes thrown up by new films. Another might involve waiting for subtitled examples of Hong Kong cinema to reach western festivals, cinemas and streaming platforms, which risks a limited number offering an unrepresentative selection. There is a third, non-exclusive way, however, and that is looking for and 'feeling into' the impurities in western cinema that constitute trace evidence of new paradigms happening elsewhere in World Cinema. This duly directs the task of identifying what is new and not belonging to western cinema to the possible impact of others that results from a global matrix of myriad encounters between cultures, scholarship, audio-visual material, films and filmmakers. In other words, backwash from the logjam of unknowability, influencing and informing western cinema, might indicate the existence of new paradigms as yet unknown, much like scientists know an otherwise unknowable star has been created in an as yet unknown universe because of the trace elements from it, like light and radiation, that wash back into our own.

Impurities as trace evidence have been collected by Nagib and Jerslev (see 2014). The task is also implicit in Galt and Schoonover's understanding of global art cinema (2010) and Queer cinema in the world too (see Schoonover and Galt 2016). Otherwise, simply spotting impurities can too easily over-determine a biased response and result in 'blindspotting'. Blindspotting occurs when the samurai stylings of *Kill Bill: Vol. 1* (Tarantino 2003) and the Bollywood dance-off of *Slumdog Millionaire* (Boyle and Tandan 2008), for example, are read by western critics as knowing pastiche, while non-western features such as Nollywood gangster film *O-Town* (Obasi 2015) are assumed to lack intrinsic value and be indebted to a hegemonic film culture that has less to do with colonialism and more to do with mass culture and postmodern fads in genres driven by global capitalism. Blindspotting also happens when a 'consensus' of western critics, ignorant of Chinese science-fiction's long-standing concern with rehabilitating science-based projections of humanistic futures since the early 1990s, only compares *Liu lang di qui/The Wandering Earth* (Gwo 2019) to films directed by Michael Bay and declares it 'won't win many points for originality' (Rotten Tomatoes 2021a). Furthermore, while analysis of the cross-pollination of influences between two cultures within a specific period can reveal the dynamics of World Cinema [such as Kenneth Chan's plotting of aesthetic, industrial and cultural references as evidence of interaction between China and Hollywood during the 1990s and 2000s (see Chan 2009)], mapping the present-past is an iterative process distinct from our attempt at reading impurities as traces of a fluid movement forwards in the holistic dynamics of World Cinema, where meaning is not retrospectively determined but continually deferred to the present-future.

In Derrida's view, the law of genre is 'precisely a principle of contamination, a law of impurity, a parasitical economy' (1980, 59). Asserting the definitive influence of western genres such as the western or the melodrama therefore also causes 'blindspotting', whereby initial recognition of generic tropes obscures recognition of anything else and contributes to the logjam. For example, following the parody and pastiche of *Chung Hing sam lam*, the noirish melodrama of *Faa yeung nin wa/In The Mood for Love* (Wong 2000) was received as indebted to the aesthetic sense and sentiment of *All That Heaven Allows* (Sirk 1955) and the *amour fou* of *Vertigo* (Hitchcock 1958). Indeed, the haptic sense of longing in the scenes of journalist Mr Chow (Tony Leung) and his neighbour Mrs Chan (Maggie Cheung) falling for and yet resisting each other while their spouses are having an affair resulted from an 'overt engagement with the aesthetic' (Galt and Schoonover 2010, 6) that meant that critics and audiences were blindspotted by the 'impurities' of foreign food, music, clothes, language and sexual mores in what resembled a Sirk-Hitchcock hybrid set in the 1960s Hong Kong, while the social and political context and meaning of the film remained comparatively unexplored. Nevertheless, it is precisely *Faa yeung nin wa*'s overt engagement with its aesthetic that allows for *Einfühlung*, that is, 'feeling into' its deeper concerns about the potential that was lost in lost histories. In fact, *Faa yeung nin wa* considers a lost past far greater than that of the unconsummated romance, one that is signalled by the jarring interruption of the lush melodrama by grainy newsreel of General Charles de Gaulle visiting Phnom Penh in 1966. This visit was a last moment of pageantry for Cambodia before civil war engulfed the region and it was marked by a spectacular sound and light show at the Angkor Wat monument. Cambodia had declared independence from France in 1953 and its ruler, Prince Sihanouk, had hoped to westernise his country, but De Gaulle's visit took place in the midst of the Cold War between western and communist blocs at the point when American involvement was escalating in Vietnam. De Gaulle used the opportunity of his address at the Olympic stadium to call on the US to leave, while pointedly not demanding the same of China, which had just begun its Cultural Revolution under Mao Zedong. The pretence of Cambodia's neutrality was soon destroyed by evidence of North Vietnamese military bases in Cambodian territory that were being equipped by China, which funded the growing war effort and deployed engineering and artillery forces in the border area. De Gaulle's address therefore emboldened the rise of the Khmer Rouge, which was backed by China in its fight against the US, and hastened the conflict that exposed American and Chinese interests in Southeast Asia as well as the genocide that erased nearly a quarter of Cambodia's population along with its past, the potential of its present, and seemingly any possible future. The implication of Mr Chow in this lost past and deferred future is evident in the final scene of *Faa yeung nin wa*, which sees him visiting Angkor Wat as a journalist in 1966, but any clarity to this political subtext and what it signified was otherwise deferred, buried like the secret that Mr Chow whispers into a hole in a monument and then blocks up with earth. The suggestion is that this secret is his love for Mrs Chan, but what if it was Chinese involvement in Cambodia? Then, the personal sheds coincidence and becomes political, even though the film's signified is rendered unknowable because we do not hear the signifier of the actual whisper of this journalist employed by Chinese media, sent firstly to cover the visit of De Gaulle to Cambodia and, secondly, to *not* cover the Chinese presence in Cambodia.

This lost past of Mr Chow and China was not unknowable, however, only deferred and as yet unknown, pending *2046* (Wong 2004), the sequel to *Faa yeung nin wa*, when the two films could be read as two half-stories about the lost past and potential future of Southeast Asia, much like the two half-stories of Hong Kong in *Chung Hing sam lam*. *Faa yeung nin wa* ends with the scene of Mr Chow in Angkor Wat, while *2046* has him writing a science-fiction novel about a futuristic train transporting people to the year 2046, where it is supposed they can reclaim their lost memories. Yet *2046* is actually not the potential of the future but the lost past, for it is the number of the room where Mr Chow met and failed to consummate the affair with Mrs Chan in *Faa yeung nin wa*. The lost past of *Faa yeung nin wa* and the possible future of *2046* thus seem irreconcilable due to the erasure of any passing present with potential in the space between them. Yet this space between them is represented, albeit paradoxically, in the deleted scenes that feature on the Tartan DVD of *Faa yeung nin wa*. Just as when Derrida proposes to place ideas and concepts under erasure he is following Heidegger's process of discussing the concept of Being, whereby he crosses the word 'Being' out and then prints both the original word and its crossing-out, so the inclusion of deleted scenes on the DVD of *Faa yeung nin wa* shows them to be both crossed out (deleted from the film) and printed (as special features for the DVD) in a Derridean sense. In addition, it is possible to state that these scenes were both 'unknowable' at the time of the film's cinema release because they had been deleted from the film, and 'as yet unknown' because they were pending the release of this DVD (and subsequent Criterion blu-ray of 2021).

In one 11-minute 'deleted/printed' scene entitled 'Chapter 3: The Seventies', Mrs Chan is shown to have foregone the high-collared Chinese *cheongsams*, close-fitting dresses that define her restricted movement while 'signalling the progression and repetition of time, specifically the time loops that characterise mourning as well as nostalgic recollection' throughout *Faa yeung nin wa* (Berghahn 2019, 43). Rather, she now wears casual western clothes of blouse and skirt that point to her imminent emigration (see Figure 4). Mr Chow, meanwhile, is represented by his young wife, a singer from Singapore (another British colony and trade rival) who considers renting and changing the apartment Mrs



Figure 4. Mrs Chan meets Mr Chow's Singaporean wife in a deleted and printed scene on the Tartan DVD of *Faa yeung nin wa*/In *The Mood For Love* (Wong 2000).

Chan is leaving, thereby overwriting any memories that the place holds of the lost past of her unrequited love for Mr Chow and installing the present passing potential of a different possible future for herself (and Singapore) with Mr Chow (and China) instead. Is the passing present of unrequited love an unknowable lost past or an as yet unknown possible future? A Derridean approach to this deleted scene may argue that its erasure from *Faa yeung nin wa* posits the necessary deferral of meaning that happens in the space between differences and is constructed 'by the network of oppositions that distinguish them and relate them to one another' (Derrida 1984, 10). This is because, following Derrida, a film gains its meaning through the process of *différance* (difference and deferral of meaning), which necessitates postponement and delay. Merely reading the impurities of *Faa yeung nin wa* as evidence of Southeast Asian-flavoured Sirk-Hitchcock pastiche is insufficient when compared to subscription to *différance*, which acknowledges the network of oppositions in all of World Cinema. This network means that the signified of *Faa yeung nin wa* is not only found in relation to its sequel (2046) and its predecessors (*All that Heaven Allows* and *Vertigo*, to name but two) but by its backwash of influence on World Cinema too, including western films such as *Moonlight* (Jenkins 2016a).

Several critics recognised the aesthetic influence of *Faa yeung nin wa* on *Moonlight* [and its director concurred (Jenkins 2016b)] but flipped the hierarchy deployed in the reception of *Faa yeung nin wa*, whose style was deemed its meaning, because *Moonlight* was judged a paradigm in American cinema on account of how its conflated themes of outsidership and otherness in the matter of being Black, homosexual and poor, when allied with an aural and visual design and aesthetic that inserted strangeness into the mainstream, demanded attention for its insurgent foreignness. *Moonlight* revealed the backwash of World Cinema in more than aesthetic or formal terms, however, because what signalled a new paradigm in American cinema was its very indebtedness to World Cinema for affinitive indications of the signified (why *Moonlight* mattered). Whereas *Moonlight* signified otherness in relation to retrograde notions of western society, culture and cinema, this signified also appeared congruent with other feelings or expressions of otherness and outsidership in World Cinema, whose identification beyond the recognition and admission of *Faa yeung nin wa* was nonetheless deferred. Based on the play *In Moonlight Black Boys Look Blue* by Tarell Alvin McCraney, *Moonlight* is set in the 1980s in the impoverished Liberty City area of Miami at the height of the war on drugs by the Republican administration and it describes both the crack-ravaged Liberty City where McCraney and Jenkins grew up and the stagnant community of its present. Following the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which ended segregation, middle-class families moved out of Liberty City and lower-income Black families moved in to properties that were mostly owned by absentee landlords (Nebhrajani 2017). By 2000, the population of Liberty City was 94.69% Black, 3.04% Hispanic and 0.59% White (City of Miami Planning and Zoning Department 2000). In response to *Moonlight's* depiction of Liberty City in relation to American cinema and society, Simran Hans duly notes 'the use of midnight blues and purples, and the vast wastes that encompass Chiron's single, isolated figure, work to create an otherworldly atmosphere, all heightened sensation and simmering, feverish emotion' (2018). Indeed, as its director attested, *Moonlight* refers to the cinema of Wong Kar-Wai in this manner, but it is not 'otherworldly' because of its aesthetic choices alone. The otherworldliness of its multifaceted protagonist, who is rendered as child, adolescent and adult as well as Black, poor and gay, is also that of Liberty City in relation to the rest of

Miami and, by extension, to the US as a whole. Paradigmatic is *Moonlight*'s concentrated otherness, which challenges White-centric, middle-class, hetero-normative depictions of Americanness, just as *Lovers Rock* (McQueen 2020) in the *Small Axe* anthology challenges similar simulacra of Britishness. *Moonlight*, like *Lovers Rock*, is not only 'other-worldly' but *a world of the other*, which, as Stephen W. Thrasher perceived, 'eschew[s] the white gaze and exist[s] entirely inside of blackness' (Thrasher 2016). Indeed, Jenkins' recourse to the dialect of Liberty City was so essential to the film's otherworldliness that he resisted code switching and rejected subtitles for its distribution, precisely because, as McCraney insists, *Moonlight*'s world of the other is (and should be perceived as) foreign in regard to what passes for American society, culture and cinema:

That accent is thick and musical. Like if you're watching Shakespeare, it takes you a minute to get attuned to it, to get involved, and that's good. It's like, wouldn't you like to come visit these wonderful people? Yes, this guy's a drug dealer, I know what he does, but let me into his world for a moment. (Del Barco 2016)

Reading *Moonlight* as a 'foreign' film in American cinema therefore avoids blindspotting while rendering it subject to the process of *différance*, which is pending the identification of congruent feelings with other examples of World Cinema, such as the films of Wong Kar-Wai. Moreover, whereas *Faa yeung nin wa* seems to participate in a genealogy anchored to 'the West' and *Moonlight*'s referral to *Faa yeung nin wa* makes it redolent of 'the Rest', these apparent contradictions are presupposed by Derrida, who 'would speak of a sort of participation without belonging – a taking part in without being part of, without having membership in a set' (1984, 59). Participation without belonging is evident in *Moonlight*, wherein the signs of Black identity, homosexuality and poverty require both exposure to make these differences explicit in its drama, and erasure to make them irrelevant in the sense that they offer no impediment to the empathy elicited by 'feeling into' the film via its aesthetics. In the first scene, for example, a long take presents Juan (Mahershala Ali) supervising drug deals and Chiron (Alex Hibbert), nicknamed Little, running from bullies. The mark of genre, the exposure, is found in the setting of the film and its focus on the social consequences of drug dealing and poverty. Instead of utilising the documentary approach that might brand the film as social realism or generically limited, however, the long take in which the camera circles the characters with a shallow depth-of-field erases the context and any convention or cliché, leaving characters whose subjectivity searches for empathetic connections. By repetition and refinement of these visual and aural motifs in ways that echo *Chung Hing sam lam* and *Faa yeung nin wa*, *Moonlight* creates an aesthetic ritual of exposure and erasure in three chapters that pushes signs of Blackness, homosexuality and poverty to the front of the screen while rendering the signifiers of love between Juan and Little in the first chapter, between the teenage Chiron (Ashton Sanders) and Kevin (Jharrel Jerome) in the second, and between Chiron as an adult nicknamed Black (Trevante Rhodes) and the adult Kevin (André Holland) in the final third, as precursors to the signified (that which matters), which is empathy (see Figure 5). *Différance* from one chapter to the next accumulatively transcends any limitations and signals the approach of a new paradigm in American cinema.

As stated, *différance* is a neologism coined by Derrida that is formed by the combined meanings of 'differ' and 'defer' and it relates to the notion of 'trace' elements in the post-



Figure 5. *Différance* signals the approach of a new paradigm in *Moonlight* (Jenkins 2016b).

structuralist chain of signification that expresses ‘the relationship to a past, to an always-already-there that no reactivation of the origin could fully master and awaken to presence’ (Derrida 1976, 64). Trace elements are like signs sought within the universe of activity before and beyond it by scientists responding to static from the Big Bang, which is an always-already-there that can hardly be conceptualised and prior to which nothing can be imagined. Shohat and Stam, and Altman too, suppose that Hollywood is the Big Bang of World Cinema and that traces of it abound, but the truth is that the ongoing Big Bang of World Cinema encloses Hollywood (the West). Derrida hints at the complexity of these relations within the sign as being between the signifier and the signified, seeing them not as subsequent nor as clear-cut as in the original Saussurean model, but rather broken by the different times – present and past – in which the elements of the sign coexist: ‘Since past has always signified present-past, the absolute past that is retained in the trace no longer rigorously merits the name “past”’ (Derrida 1976, 64). This leads Madan Sarup to conclude that ‘*the sign marks an absent presence*. Rather than present the object, we employ the sign; however, the meaning of the sign is always postponed or deferred’ (1993, 44). In this he follows Derrida, who deletes and retains the deleted sign, arguing that:

Deletion is the final writing of an epoch. Under its strokes the presence of a transcendental signified is effaced while still remaining legible, is destroyed while making visible the very idea of the sign. In as much as it de-limits onto-theology, the metaphysics of presence and logocentrism, this last writing is also the first writing. (Derrida 1976, 23)

As read by Sarup, Derrida utilises this method because the concept of the sign is ‘inadequate yet necessary’ which is why the word is marked by a cross but not completely

deleted (Sarup 1993, 33). *Faa yeung nin wa* not only marks its deleted scenes with a cross and keeps them but also marks *All that Heaven Allows* and *Vertigo* too, just as *Moonlight* marks *Faa yeung nin wa* with a cross, but none of these films are deleted. Referral to *All that Heaven Allows* and *Vertigo* is an inadequate yet necessary part of understanding *Faa yeung nin wa*, which is an inadequate yet necessary part of understanding *Moonlight*. But the most important strategy for World Cinema studies is to cross out but not delete the knowledge (and knowability) gained from looking backwards for influence upon any film in question, while also looking forwards into a new epoch of difference and deferral of meaning that points towards the as yet unknown, whereby *All that Heaven Allows* and *Vertigo* defer to *Faa yeung nin wa* for their meaning while *Faa yeung nin wa* defers to *Moonlight* and so on. Thus, although the meaning of these films is deferred in relation to one another, each film represents difference when considered individually, as do all the films in World Cinema, which co-exist at the same time and in a multi-directional flow. Deferral is constant because the search for a new paradigm within World Cinema cannot be concluded by stating its existence, only by constantly asking how the paradigm might be constructed *next* and where it might be located *next* so that the act of questioning overrides unknowability and posits World Cinema as being as yet unknown. Recognition of the absent presence of World Cinema in Hollywood might be deferred until its backwash hits, which is detectable in the impurities coming to the fore of American films such as *Moonlight* and *Widows*. However, the true signified (that which matters) is the levelling of World Cinema studies that depend upon the deferral of meaning so that erasure of any and all hierarchy can occur, thereby breaking the logjam of unknowability and inaugurating a deletion or 'last writing' of what World Cinema has previously meant and a new approach or 'first writing' of what it can signify.

Finally then, in order for *différance* to function as it should in the study of World Cinema, we must resist being blindspotted and instead read films as being 'under erasure' or 'sous rature' first (Derrida 1976, 23). This is the same ethical stance posited by Martin-Jones, but whereas he contends that films such as *Loong Boonmee raleuk chat*, *El abrazo de la serpiente* and *También la lluvia* speak of erasure, this might be resolved by reference to even these films' own structuralist equations, which delete generic tropes and then show *both* the trope *and* its deletion. Even *Loong Boonmee raleuk chat*, dubbed 'deeply enigmatic' by a consensus of western critics (Rotten Tomatoes 2021b), is decipherable by the structuralist equations that Apichatpong Weerasethakul admits to dissecting in sections shot as different genres that show tropes and their deletion, including 'old cinema with stiff acting and classical staging [,] documentary style [,] costume drama [and] my kind of film when you see long takes of animals and people driving' (Green 2014, 128). Although a film such as *Loong Boonmee raleuk chat* can contain generic tropes, their erasure is beyond parody and pastiche, which refer backwards to other films for knowability rather than deferring meaning towards the as yet unknown. Erasure is the arena of new paradigms, where western audiences will and can only (possibly) recognise a new paradigm in World Cinema when it washes back to the west. Where *Wind River*, *Chung Hing sam lam*, *Faa yeung nin wa*, *Moonlight*, *Loong Boonmee raleuk chat* and *Widows* expose the tropes of genre, they also leave or create a space where a new paradigm can grow, one that is not limited by referral but liberated by deferral. The trace – and visual and aural evidence of this as impurities – links one with the other, but with the further complication that this liberation by deferral is 'the becoming-absent and

the becoming-unconscious of the subject' (Derrida 1976, 69). Attempts at understanding World Cinema by reading traces rely upon recognising the absent presence of films within each other and yet leaving space for 'the desire of presence' (Derrida 1976, 69) too, which is both exposed and erased, referred and deferred and, to answer the question posed in our introduction, both theirs and ours.

Three women, one Black, one Hispanic and one White, leave a sauna. Back in *Widows*, wherein the tropes of the gangster film are subject to a shift in genre and gender dynamics, the question with which we began of 'what is "ours" and what is "theirs"' in the scene in the sauna is both exposed and erased because the answer is both referred and deferred. Like *Moonlight*, *Widows* makes the paradoxes of referral and deferral, exposure and erasure, ours and theirs, evident and does not seek their resolution. It only explores *différance* by inviting its audience to ask where and why this is happening and what will happen next. As a gangster film, its Chicago setting is elemental, being once associated with Al Capone and later with Donald Trump; yet in the multi-racial make-up of these female characters with idiosyncratic motives for a heist there are trace elements of backwash, of what is happening in the rest of World Cinema. In the sauna, for example, *Widows* employs erasure to literally strip the genre elements down to their core, where the women feel into congruent feelings of marginalisation and abuse that result, not without tension, in a performance of female unity amidst racial diversity that promises to erase the White American male from the gangster genre. The scene is a synecdoche of the entire film because it exposes differences (such as them being female and the colour of their skin) and erases everything else (such as their social status). It therefore enacts referral and deferral of meaning: referral to the signs of countless gangster television series and films in which White male gangsters sit around in saunas [including *The Sopranos* (Chase, HBO, 1999–2007) and *The Irishman* (Scorsese 2019)] and deferral to a signified that is as yet unknown. It not only claims the sauna as a space for females who are sexual but not objectified as such, it also suggests the gangster genre will be literally redressed by these characters as something approaching a new paradigm of feminist, multi-racial, pan-sexual protest against neo-liberalism, patriarchy, misogyny and any remnants of colonialism. Thus, like *Moonlight*, the otherness and outsidership of *Widows* within American cinema is not unknowable, because it relies upon referral to gangster tropes for its spin, but what it signifies (why it matters) is also deferred, as yet unknown and pending questions that connect with ideas of race, gender, sexuality, economic status, social sedimentation, and much else besides that is happening in World Cinema.

And where might this awareness of referral and deferral, of a Derridean deployment of *différance*, point next for studies of World Cinema? At the climax of *Widows*, the group of women having pulled off their heist, the wounded Alice (Elizabeth Debicki) is left outside a hospital. Her survival is unknown, her existence unknowable, until finally, in an epilogue, Veronica (Viola Davis) encounters her by chance at a diner. Both Veronica and Alice have clashed several times throughout the film, so Alice leaves the diner alone. The camera follows her in a tracking shot while she opens her car, but before she gets in Veronica's call is heard: 'Alice?'. The camera then pans left off Alice to frame Veronica on the sidewalk as, with a tentative smile, she asks: 'How you been?'. And the film then cuts to black. This is because the expression and understanding of *différance* is empathy, whose meaning is made most visible by its lack. Although the plots of genre films are closed, the ongoing trajectories of their respective protagonists are expressed via

congruent feelings even though their potential is unrequited and unexplored. Despite the fade to black, therefore, the ending to *Widows* is only deferred, pending a bridge of empathy between characters once again separated by their differences. And because the fade to black erases referral and exposes deferral it assumes a responsibility to ask and try to answer questions, which is what will push World Cinema studies forwards, towards what might appear to be the rock of the unknowable but is only the hard place of the as yet unknown.

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